

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

October 23, 2003

SALMON CREEK GREEN SCHOOL

File No. 03-053

Project Manager: Richard Retecki

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to the Harmony Union School District for the creation of a “green” school to include construction of a creek observation deck, a nursery, an outdoor classroom, and a nature trail; preparation of a design for a community resource center, a trail feasibility plan, a public access plan, and a forestry management plan; and enhancement of a riparian corridor and a wetland area.

LOCATION: Occidental, Salmon Creek watershed, Sonoma County (Exhibits 1 and 2)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Environmental Education

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Regional Map

Exhibit 2: Project Location

Exhibit 3: Organizations Supporting the Project

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Sections 31100 and 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to the Harmony Union School District for the creation of a “green” school to include construction of a creek observation deck, a nursery, an outdoor classroom, and a nature trail; preparation of a design for a community resource center, a trail feasibility plan, a public access plan, and a forestry management plan; and enhancement of a riparian corridor and a wetland area.

Prior to the disbursement of funds, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget, project schedule, names of sub-contractors, and a sign plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy funding.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapters 3 and 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
 2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff is recommending the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of \$300,000 to the Harmony Union School District (HUSD) to design and construct facilities and habitat enhancement projects in relation to its green school program at its Salmon Creek School. Projects to be funded through this authorization include a native plant nursery, an outdoor classroom, a creek observation deck for classroom purposes, a trail feasibility study, public access and trail improvements, and the enhancement of several natural areas located on campus.

The Salmon Creek School is located approximately one mile south of Occidental, a vibrant rural community located within the Salmon Creek watershed in southwestern Sonoma County (see Exhibits 1 and 2). The school site totals 67 acres, and is comprised of several natural areas, the school buildings, a soccer field and basketball courts. Salmon Creek traverses the western boundary of the school site.

The District’s project would lead to an increase in the number of pupils studying environmental education on the site from 420 per year to approximately 1,500 - 1,800 students per year. At present, the existing environmental program serves the immediate school population and provides a “mother” school garden for plant propagation, a recycling program, worm bins, compost for the school site, an annual harvest celebration, and, a yearly plant sale. There have been numerous requests from other school districts and nonprofit organizations to use the Salmon Creek site and programs for their students or members. The proposed project and facilities would continue to serve the existing K-8 local and county school population, but with the proposed improvements high school students, college students, and nonprofit organizations could utilize the campus and surrounding natural areas. A preliminary list of those school districts and others interested in using the facilities may be found in Exhibit 3.

The HUSD has proposed a multi-faceted project. The existing environmental education program would be expanded and improved with school district resources to provide focused learning, curriculum development, a “seed” program for teachers, and a monitoring program for Salmon Creek. The proposed project would complement the District’s program by providing necessary facilities and planning activities. This project would construct a creek observation deck, which has already been designed and engineered, to provide safe access for viewing and monitoring Salmon Creek and fishery resources. The project would include a nursery with a working greenhouse to assist in the ongoing propagation of and restoration of native plants for Salmon Creek and neighboring watersheds. An outdoor classroom would be constructed to provide area for classes, lectures, and forums. Also proposed is the design of an ecological building, to include a

kitchen and cafeteria that would provide space for teacher training, study sessions, workshops, and environmental education classes.

A trail study will also be conducted to assess the feasibility of connecting the school trails to other trail systems leading inland and to the coast. The existing nature trail would be signed and interpretive information developed and placed along the trail. Public access points would be designated and developed to specific locations on the school property. Also, a “timber cruise” would be conducted to devise a forestry management plan for the oak/Redwood forest on the property’s eastern boundary. Finally, enhancement of the wetland area would take place, as well as the removal of invasive species along Salmon Creek and the subsequent planting of native riparian species. Students would participate in all of these activities. A small grant has been secured from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to train students in enhancement techniques and procedures.

The Salmon Creek School has an existing environmental education program that is recognized for its excellence. The school district has a history of environmental partnerships with educational institutions, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations. The program is in demand by its own school population (which is increasing) and by others within Sonoma County. The school locale offers various environments and habitats that provide exceptional opportunities for environmental education. The project would bolster existing environmental education partnerships and make the school attractive to many others seeking a magnet location for environmental education.

There has been an increase in demand within the school district for environmental education and associated facilities because of rising school population and the addition of grades 9 through 12 to the Salmon Creek campus. Also, the school district has been receiving requests from other schools, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies throughout Sonoma County to use the site and their environmental education resources. The Green School project is expected to serve 1,500 to 1,800 students per year, as well as teachers, environmental groups, and public agencies. All of these reasons prompted the district to seek expansion and development of the environmental education program.

Site Description: The Salmon Creek School site totals 67 acres. The school buildings and physical education areas are somewhat centrally located within the campus and are surrounded by prominent natural areas. A forest of oak and Redwood dominate the eastern quarter of the campus. The forest contains an existing trail and an abandoned railroad right-of-way that traverses the forest from south to north. There are areas of sedimentation along rivulet channels and small streams. Also, there are several large redwoods that have fallen and need to be removed.

South from the administration building, and totaling approximately 12 acres, is a wetland area. The wetland is a swale that traps runoff down-slope from the forest. It is a lush verdant area that is essentially undisturbed and is off-limits to the school population except for supervised projects. Salmon Creek flows along the western boundary of the site and several segments are in need of riparian corridor restoration. Other segments of the stream are shrouded by a dense canopy of riparian growth. The stream channel has several hydrologic breaks that provide waterfalls but also natural fish ladders for migrating species. One of the waterfall breaks will be the site of the proposed observation deck.

The Salmon Creek is a naturally diversified and dynamic coastal stream and watershed that flows through three major geologic formations on its way to the Pacific Ocean. The school site is

located within quick striking distance of the Sonoma coast, the Estero Americano, and the Russian River, all of which are utilized by the HUSD as outdoor classrooms.

Project History: The Salmon Creek Green School project came about as part of the Conservancy's effort to address the environmental, agricultural, aquatic, and environmental resources within the Salmon Creek watershed. This project is one of five that will comprehensively address the state of the watershed's resources and implement projects to enhance and restore the watershed and its resources. The Conservancy has funded the Salmon Creek Ranch Enhancement Plans, the Coastal Prairie Stewardship Study, and the Grazing Handbook development and publication. Staff is also working with local organizations to develop a proposal for preparation of the Salmon Creek Estuary Study and Plan which will be presented to the Conservancy at a future meeting.

This project will focus on enhancement activities within the school site that will support the District's environmental education program which educates and trains students and adults in skills directly applicable to the restoration of the natural environment. The Green School project will provide needed facilities and improvements for the successful operation of the program.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$300,000
Harmony Union School District	<u>90,300</u>
Total Project Cost:	\$390,300

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the fiscal year 2003-2004 appropriation from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal Beach Protection Fund of 2002 (Proposition 50). Proposition 50 authorizes the use of funds for development of facilities to promote public access and participation in the conservation of land, water and wildlife. Eligible projects under Proposition 50 include nature centers, like the proposed project, that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands and provide wildlife viewing, outdoor experiences, and conservation education programs (California Water Code, Section 79571).

As required by Proposition 50, the proposed project is consistent with local and regional watershed plans. Water Code Section 79507. *The Sonoma County Coastal Wetland Enhancement Plan (Plan)* is a multi-jurisdictional planning document providing guidance for watershed protection activities in southwestern Sonoma County. The *Plan* concludes that efforts should be made to restore and enhance the estuaries, stream banks, alluvial valleys, and grasslands of Salmon Creek and its tributaries. (*Plan*, pages, 38, 63-64). The project is also consistent with the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board's goal to protect beneficial resources, as described in the Water Quality Control Board Plan (Basin Plan) for the San Francisco Bay Basin (1995).

The HUSD has received four small grants that assist with the current environmental education program and pertain to the proposed authorization. The grants are:

Salmon Creek Site Council	\$ 1,500
U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife	1,800
Veith Charitable Trust	2,000
Christensen Fund	<u>25,000</u>

Total

\$ 30,300

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The Salmon Creek Green School project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 3 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Section 31119 (a) (1), that enables the Conservancy to undertake educational projects for pupils in kindergarten to grade 12, inclusive, relating to the preservation, protection, enhancement and maintenance of coastal resources, and may award grants to nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and public agencies for those purposes. The proposed project will complement the existing environmental education program and accommodate four additional school grades. This authorization will also provide additional facilities that will allow for the participation of more than 1,500 students per year from the urban centers of Sonoma county and the Bay Area. Also, the hands-on training and outdoor classroom participation will acquaint students with the diversity and complexity of the natural environment.

The project is also undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, to address resource and recreational goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. The enhancement aspects of this project will protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats, connecting corridors, trails, a watershed, scenic resources, a riparian corridor, and an oak/redwood forest and other resources of regional importance, in conformance with Section 31162 (b). Also, by introducing urban school students to the natural areas of the school site and the surrounding Sonoma county environment and involving them in the environmental education program, the project will "promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes," consistent with Section 31162 (d).

Finally, the project satisfies the criteria for project priority under Section 31163(d), as follows: 1) the project serves a multi-jurisdictional constituency, since it will provide linkages to other regional trails, the California Coastal Trail, and the Pacific Ocean and since it will provide for educational opportunities throughout the region; 2) the project can be implemented in a timely fashion: once funded the design and planning work will follow immediately; 3) if the project is not implemented immediately, it may become difficult to retain the interest of the public education institutions who will need to secure viable environmental education programs for their students; 4) the project has four additional funding sources, along with a vibrant and dedicated Environmental Education Working Committee that has donated hundreds of hours of work in making the project a reality.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) AND OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective C**, the project will expand or improve educational or interpretive programs that are tied to on the ground restoration projects that will benefit watershed and coastal resources and serve urban populations.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The proposed project has a broad level of support from school districts, colleges and universities, public agencies and officials, environmental education programs, nonprofit organizations, and the public in general. Project supporters include: Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, State Senator Wes Chesbro, the California High Performance Schools Program, the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, the UC Bodega Marine Lab, Sonoma State University Environmental Education Department, and the UC Extension Program. Letters of Support are included in Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The Salmon Creek watershed lies within western Sonoma County, one of the nine Bay Area counties, and is a coastal watershed with valuable and diverse resources and habitat. The green school project and environmental education program will benefit the watershed, as well as inland and coastal resources by expanding the effective geographic area that the environmental education program can reach.
5. **Need:** Although the district has been awarded several small program grants, they do not provide enough funds for the facilities necessary to expand their program outreach to other schools. Nor do they allow for the proposed construction projects, trail and forestry plans, and, the hands-on wetland and riparian enhancements aspects of the project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The establishment of facilities, environmental programs, seminars, work study sessions and projects, and a watershed perspective, will draw students and teachers from not only Sonoma county, but also from the greater Bay Area. The District anticipates serving 1,500 or more students per year.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The Harmony Union School District wishes to begin the expanded environmental education program at the beginning of the January 2004 semester so funding must be secured this autumn.
12. **Readiness:** The grantee has begun to revise the existing environmental education program, has conducted a design charette, mobilized the school community for volunteer days, and contacted numerous potential supporters and users of the green school site.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the "Project History" section above.
15. **Cooperation:** The Harmony Union School District has secured the cooperation of the School Board; students, teachers and other officials; legislators, resource agencies, other educational

institutions, funding entities, natural resource professionals, and volunteers in order to carry out this project and the environmental education program. In particular, the HUSD has received a small grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to train students so that they may participate in the wetland and riparian corridor enhancement components of the project.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The Salmon Creek Green School project is categorically exempt from review of environmental impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it involves the construction of above-ground, limited small facilities (14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15303); minor alterations to land, water and or vegetation in the form of erosion control, sedimentation removal and restoration of native species (§15304); and, it involves basic data collection, resource evaluation, and planning activities with respect to the design work, trail study and public access and forestry management plans (§15306). These latter activities are also statutorily exempt under §15262, as feasibility and planning studies for future actions which have not yet been adopted funded or approved. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.